Creating a Safe Passage: Elder Mentors and Vulnerable Youth

By Andrea S. Taylor and Joy G. Dryfoos

An ever-increasing number of children in the United States are growing up with little hope of enjoying the benefits that come with adulthood. They are not learning the skills necessary to participate in the educational system or to make the transition into the labor force. They often cannot become responsible parents because they have limited experience in family life and lack the resources to raise their own children. This new class of vulnerable youth—emerging in our inner cities, on the fringes of suburbia, and in rural areas—is functionally illiterate, disconnected from school, and prone to drug abuse, depression, and early criminal activity. These are the children who are at high risk of becoming parents of unplanned and unwanted babies and of failing to become responsible adults (Dryfoos, 1998; Ginzberg, Berliner, and Ostow, 1988).

This article describes the current situation for vulnerable youth and then discusses an example of a successful intergenerational program, Across Ages, that improves their chances of overcoming barriers.

The Current Status of Youth

Currently, almost 30 million young people in the United States are between the ages of 10 and 17 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). In 1995, about two-thirds of teens were white and non-Hispanic and one third non-white or Hispanic. By the year 2010, it is expected that 40 percent of all youth will be nonwhite or Hispanic, with the highest growth for Hispanic and Asian youth.

Youth now live in many different family configurations. Today, half of all marriages end in divorce, and more than half of all children will spend time in a single-parent family (Zill and Nord, 1994), typically with the mother. Poverty and lack of healthcare have negative effects on millions of adolescents, especially those living only with their mothers and those in minority families. Ninety-five percent of young people aged 10 to 17 are currently enrolled in
school; about half a million are not (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994). Young people who drop out of school before age 18 are disproportionately disadvantaged, and increasing percentages are Hispanic.

In truth, young people engaging in sex and drug abuse and other forms of delinquency is not new. What has changed, however, are the intensity, the scale, and the dangerous consequences. For example, according to a national study by the Centers for Disease Control (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996), one third of youth smoke frequently, more than half drink frequently, and one-fourth use marijuana frequently. In addition, more than 50 percent of all high school students report that they have had sexual intercourse, and a high percentage of sexually active youth are still having unprotected sex, with the accompanying risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. Twenty percent of high school students carry a weapon, and 12 percent of males carry a gun. Juvenile arrests have almost doubled in the last decade, and the homicide rate for youth aged 14 to 17 is almost two and a half times higher than a decade ago, especially among African-American males. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teenagers (Ozer et al., 1994).

Young people heavily involved in behaviors that have potentially damaging consequences share many common characteristics. These often include early "acting out," an absence of nurturing parents, evidence of having been a victim of child abuse, disengagement from school, involvement with a negative peer group, depression, residence in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and little exposure to the work world.

Resilient Youth

Of course, not every child in a dysfunctional family, an inferior school, or a poor community fails to thrive (e.g., Werner and Smith, 1982; Garmaz, 1985). Those youth who do well in spite of such problems often share common characteristics or situations, which have important implications for those seeking to develop programs to support vulnerable youth.

The components are in fact clear: attachment to a caring adult, attendance at an effective school, residence in a safe community, acquisition of social skills to deal with peer influences, and exposure to career paths. We know enough about the problems of high-risk youth and the attributes of those who succeed to devise effective programs to address the situation. Increasingly, intergenerational initiatives have emerged as a vehicle for mobilizing powerful but underutilized human resources on behalf of vulnerable youth.

Intergenerational Mentoring

Older people have more time to devote to new pursuits and are in an ideal position to provide the support that at-risk young people need. This kind of effort requires time, attention, patience, understanding, and consistency—all commodities in short supply among other adults, whose lives as workers and parents are already overextended. Older people who themselves may have experienced the same marginal status as high-risk youth seem especially resourceful in reaching out to young people (Freedman, 1988). For young people who lack a future orientation and perceive that they have few choices, an older adult who has experienced significant change can offer a life perspective that is rooted in survival and can provide a continuity between past, present, and future. For elders, involvement with youth provides an opportunity to feel needed and to pass on the knowledge they have accumulated over a lifetime.

The concept of mentoring as a viable prevention and intervention strategy has gained increasing attention from practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and foundations (Freedman, 1988). Mentoring refers to a relationship between a more experienced person and a younger person and involves mutual caring, commitment, and trust (Flaxman, Ascher, and Harrington, 1988).

Across Ages—A Successful Model

Across Ages, developed by Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning in Philadelphia, is an example of a comprehensive, multidimensional program that has been successful in helping youth navigate the difficult course through the early teen years. Originally designed for substance-abuse prevention, the model was expanded to address a number of
risks and protective factors is now part of a wide-ranging strategy for positive youth development. The centerpiece of Across Ages is the involvement of older adult volunteers as mentors to young people. In addition to spending time with their mentors, children in Across Ages are involved in community service that benefits the neighborhoods around their schools and receive classroom instruction to cope with stress and promote positive decision-making. The program also provides support to children’s teachers, parents, and family members through workshops, recreational events, and counseling or referral.

The young people in Across Ages live in some of the city’s most economically depressed neighborhoods, characterized by poverty, a high incidence of substance abuse and drug-related crime, and block after block where most of the houses are abandoned. Student attendance is poor, and achievement is low—many of the Across Ages children are at least one year behind in school. Many live with grandparents or other relatives because their parents are unable to care for them. Unemployment is high, and many of the children know few adults who are working.

Mentoring. The Across Ages mentors range in age from 60 to 85 years and are predominantly African American, reflecting the ethnicity of the population of children they are serving. The typical Across Ages mentor is a high school graduate who held a skilled or semiskilled position during his or her working years. Some retired professionals are also in the group. More than a third of the mentors are male. Some are widowed or divorced, and the majority are grandparents. Across Ages mentors say they joined the program in order to share their experience, to feel useful, and to give back to the community. Many had been retired for a while and had not found retirement as fulfilling as they once anticipated.

The mentors are carefully screened and trained and receive constant supervision and support from project staff. Prior to matching, mentors and youth participate in classroom-based activities to help them get to know one another and to allow project staff to observe the natural pairings that might occur. Once matched, the pairs spend an average of four to five hours a week together, attending sporting and cultural events, participating in weekend activities organized by the program, and with mentors helping in the classroom or with homework after school. Throughout, the process emphasizes establishing communication and building trust.

Community service activities. A second factor contributing to enhanced resiliency is participation in work that is meaningful and benefits others in some direct and personal way. Across Ages students, usually accompanied by their mentors, visit with frail elders in nursing homes. Prior to the visits, students receive training from project staff to help them better understand the issues that may arise with advanced age and declining health. All visits are carefully planned and structured.

Classroom-based life-skill curriculum. A third component of the project is the promotion of social competence, or life skills, which make young people better able to resist negative peer pressure and potentially unhealthy behavior (Hawkins, 1988). Across Ages trains the children’s teachers to help students improve these skills in the classroom through weekly lessons using the Positive Youth Development Curriculum (Weissberg, Caplan, and Bennett, 1988).

Parent involvement. Strengthening the bonds between parents and children of course has enormous potential for reversing some of the effects of despair and alienation, but it is also extremely challenging (Kumpfer, 1987; Hawkins, 1988). Across Ages provides opportunities for parents and other family members to participate in workshops and activities with their children. Workshops have addressed such topics as understanding adolescent sexuality and setting goals and limits. Examples of activities include student talent shows, African dance recitals, and storytelling.

Evaluation. Both outcome and process data were used for the evaluation of Across Ages for the period from 1991 to 1998, with a classic randomized pretest-posttest control group design (Campbell and Stanley, 1966). Each program year, approximately ninety students had mentors and participated in all program components. A second group of ninety did not have mentors but participated in all other program activities.
A third group of approximately 180 youth served as a comparison and received no interventions. These groups are referred to as Mentoring, Program, and Control, respectively. Surveys were used to examine the effects of the intervention as measured by student performance on a number of psychosocial scales and school attendance. The research also looked at the specific effects of level of intensity of mentor involvement on outcome measures. Process data collected from evaluation forms and one-on-one interviews with program staff, mentors, teachers, and parents were also used in the evaluation.

The data indicate that Across Ages has had a significant impact on many of the children, but greater program effects were seen for those youth who worked with an elder mentor. In general, scores were most favorable for those children who received mentoring in addition to the other program components. As compared to the children in the Program group, those in the Mentoring group exhibited better scores on measures of attitudes toward school, the future, and elders. They also reported less substance use.

Further analysis suggests that the level of mentoring has an impact on student outcomes. Youth whose mentors were highly involved (i.e., spent up to six hours or more with them each week) showed significant differences on a number of measures like days absent from school compared to those whose mentors were less involved (LoSciuto et al., 1996).

Qualitative research explored the mentor-youth relationship and provided a better understanding of the type of support needed by mentors to build and sustain successful relationships. Older adults become mentors in order to share their experience, to feel useful, and to give back to the community. A common theme expressed by both youth and elders is the need to be appreciated and to find meaningful work.

In order for an older mentor’s relationship with a student to result in positive outcomes, such as improved school attendance, an effective relationship must of course be developed first. Interview data suggest that mentors who nurture, coach, and encourage their students, engage in mutual collaborative problem-solving, and work cooperatively with family members whenever possible were more likely to be satisfied with the mentoring experience and successful in sustaining the relationship for more than a year. Helping the youth set realistic, attainable goals was another predictor of satisfaction and success for mentors, presumably because both the mentor and the youth could see measurable progress. Mentors indicated that the consistent support of project staff was critical to helping them through the challenges that arise in working with very high-risk youth, a finding supported by other mentoring research (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch, 1996).

For many students in Across Ages the transition to middle school brought profound changes in classroom achievement and behavior. Mentors played an important role in helping their youths succeed in school. They would help out regularly in the classroom or work on special projects in the library, attend school plays and assemblies, or chaperone school trips. They made sure their youth got to school regularly and on time. For caregivers who were unable, unwilling, or too embarrassed to go to school and talk with the teachers, the mentors sometimes became a bridge between the parent and the school. For many youth, it was knowing that someone cared that made a difference.

My mom died this year, and my mentor came to be with me the very next day after he found out. He talked to me about when his mom died when he was just my age and how sad he was and how angry he was. He said he never really got over it because he didn’t have anybody to talk to or help him out. That’s when he started doing drugs and getting into trouble. He said he was going to make sure that didn’t happen to me.

He was right there for me and he never let me down. Even times when I didn’t show up, you know, just tried to blow him off like it wasn’t important. He was still there. And you know what I learned? I don’t always have to do crazy stuff to feel O.K.—I’ve got better things to do.

—Richard, age 12

The Challenges

It would appear that older adults can be a tremendous support to some of our most at-risk youth. Yet, there are challenges that are unique to working with these two populations, as well as those typical of any program imple-
mentation effort. Following are just a few of the lessons learned from Across Ages.

Project infrastructure and governance. For a program to be effective, the sponsoring organization has to make a long-term commitment, including financial support and monitoring.

Collaboration. Any effort involving older adults and youth will require collaboration between organizations—most likely between the sponsoring agency, the aging network, and the educational system.

Ageism. Ageism works in a number of ways. Participating youth may have stereotypes about older adults, and older adults may have stereotypes about young people and may even be fearful of them. School officials and organizational staff may question whether older people can be good role models for youth, whether they can keep up with them or will be too easily threatened or intimidated. Such issues can be dealt with through careful training and education, but it is important to be aware of how pervasive they are.

Recruitment. Obtaining older volunteers for a program requiring a long-term commitment with a high-risk population is not easy. It is important to have a clear understanding of the qualities sought in elder mentors. Participants in Across Ages, for example, need to place a strong value on education but do not have to be college graduates. They need to be good listeners, be sensitive to the needs of the youth, and be able to establish limits and help the youth set goals.

Stipends. Because many potential mentors are on low fixed incomes, providing a small stipend to help offset any costs will ensure recruitment of a more diverse population.

Screening and training. Screening should include a variety of strategies like interviews, references, and background checks. Training is essential to maintaining a strong corps of skilled volunteers and is also a good screening mechanism for potential mentors.

Monitoring relationships. Regular in-service meetings allow mentors to share experiences with each other and project staff. Similar meetings should occur with the youth, and staff must be available to assist pairs if any problems arise.

Youth and family relationships. It is essential to engage family members in program activities and to provide ways for them to be involved with their child’s mentor.

Confidentiality. Troubled young people have to be assured that whatever they share with elder mentors will be treated confidentially. Mutual trust is essential.

Conclusion

The challenge of assisting all youth to achieve responsible adulthood is enormous. Millions of young people need immediate, intensive, individual attention. It is very tempting to dismiss this call to action because the solutions seem so complex and overwhelming. It seems as though the odds are stacked against successfully achieving the goal. Demography is at work producing an even larger wave of adolescents tumbling into a population increasingly weighted by long-lived older adults. The active workforce will have a much greater responsibility than ever before to support the young and the old.

But while we cannot solve all the world’s economic and social problems, we do know what to do to help youngsters. The strategy examined in this article, elder mentoring, can have a substantial impact on young adolescents, if the programs are strong and powerful and provide careful recruitment, training, and supervision.

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References


